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RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 3033
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1278

C O N F I D E N T I A L OSLO 001352

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MOLLY GOWER/SCA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/01/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [CE](#) [NO](#)

SUBJECT: NORWAY ASSESSES THE GENEVA SRI LANKA TALKS

Classified By: CDA Kevin M. Johnson, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. Norway attributes the recent Geneva talks stalemate to the evolving negotiating position of both the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and the LTTE, divisions within the GSL negotiating team and the LTTE's decision to raise the A-9 road as a major issue. The Norwegians note the LTTE's apparent willingness to hold future discussions (as evidenced in the Geneva press conference), while predicting that violence will continue. Despite renewed violence, Norway envisions renewed talks in January or early spring, depending on the domestic situation in Sri Lanka. End Summary.

12. (C) On October 31, the DCM and Pol/Econ officers met with Tore Hattrem, Director General of the MFA's Peace and Reconciliation Section. The meeting focused on peace efforts in several global hot spots. Accordingly, Hattrem drew together several Section members, consisting of MFA advisers who address conflicts in Sri Lanka, Colombia, Somalia, Haiti, Sudan and the Philippines (See Septel).

Reviewing Geneva: Strategies, Goals and Outcome

13. (C) Special Envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer led discussions on Sri Lanka, debriefing us on the recent Geneva talks. He noted that Norway had hoped to exit the talks with new dates for further discussions and was disappointed to end with a stalemate. He reflected on several issues which contributed to the Geneva outcome. First, the timing for the negotiations was "all wrong," particularly given that leading up to the talks the LTTE was perceived as weak (an atypical negotiating status for the Tigers), while the GSL was viewed in a militarily advantageous position. These fortunes were reversing in the days before the talks given the failed GSL northern offensive and recent LTTE suicide attacks. Such events further altered the parties' negotiating positions.

14. (C) Complicating matters, the parties' negotiating strategies were divergent. The GSL initially focused on political issues (within the context of a unified Sri Lankan state), while the LTTE held humanitarian issues paramount. The LTTE demonstrated flexibility by agreeing to discuss political issues, if GSL negotiators would also address humanitarian concerns. In addition, the LTTE agreed to many core issues (including welcoming the Memorandum of Understanding in southern political parties).

15. (C) But the LTTE flexibility did not produce any

results, given that the GSL delegation was "internally divided" and had no real mandate to give concessions. As an example, Hanssen-Bauer described the destabilizing role of two GSL negotiators (members of the Janatha Vimukthi Peremuna (JVP) political party, appointed by the GSL because of political considerations) whose presence was to ensure that the peace talks failed. In addition, the GSL viewed the LTTE as not being serious, merely biding time to allow LTTE forces an opportunity to regroup.

¶6. (C) Other challenges were separate goals, particularly the LTTE's choice of the opening of the A-9 road as a deal-breaker. The GSL was more focused on past issues while the LTTE looked to the future. The LTTE wants to maintain traffic on the road to interfere with potential government operations, while ensuring that the income flow resulting from tolls continues to fill LTTE coffers. Advisor Tomas Stangeland noted that the A-9 serves as a potent symbol, with its closure representing an essential LTTE defeat. For that very reason, the GSL is adamant it remain closed. Thus, the LTTE's sole focus on the A-9 was seen by the Norwegians as a "major blunder."

¶7. (C) The Special Envoy noted that both parties were under international pressure in Geneva, and that neither party excelled in political dialogues. He recalled that Prabhakaran, although adept in military matters, has poor (and worsening) political acumen. (Note: Hanssen-Bauer said Prabhakaran almost never sees foreigners or even anyone willing to disagree with him. He likely reads only Tamil press. His isolation affects his judgment. Hanssen-Bauer said that the Sri Lankan President also lacks advisors willing to tell hard truths). Alternatively, the Special Envoy surmised that the GSL, attempting to curry international support, is labeling its efforts as fighting a war against terrorists and may feel time is on its side in this endeavor.

¶8. (C) Turning to the forthcoming Hero's Day speech (Prabhakaran's yearly speech that launches the LTTE's year-long strategy), Hanssen-Bauer emphasized that the LTTE warned prior to entering into recent Geneva negotiations that the LTTE needed some immediate results to sustain domestic support. With the talks at a stalemate, the Special Envoy predicts the speech would not be definitive, and likely allow the LTTE to keep its options open.

Nonetheless, A Happy Press Conference

¶9. (C) Despite the outcome, the press conference following the talks was "a happy moment." Fears that not setting a date for new discussions would lead to a cessation of any dialogue did not materialize. Both parties restated their commitment to the political process (with Hanssen-Bauer pointing out the LTTE's willingness to resume negotiations). On a related matter, he noted that the LTTE's recent cancellation of trips to Norway and Iceland does not contradict this purported willingness to negotiate. The LTTE canceled its trips to Norway and Iceland based upon the LTTE's safety concerns (e.g. guarantees of safe transit from Sri Lanka to both Nordic countries (and back to Sri Lanka) might be revoked by the GSL).

Looking Ahead

¶10. (C) Hanssen-Bauer predicted that the present violent situation will continue (but not lead to all out war), and both parties could continue to "do serious harm." GSL forces are effectively bogged down by LTTE strategies (such as tying down GSL troops with demining duties and diverting one-third of the GSL's elite forces to Colombo). He predicts that a new LTTE offensive could occur following the Geneva talks. Alternatively, the LTTE may not want to jeopardize its popular support by spoiling its reputation within the international community. He suggested that the timing of future talks will hinge on key issues unfolding, including the resumption of violence (with any future talks then

restarting in April or May). Alternatively, if the two central Sri Lankan political parties cooperate on the budget, he predicted that talks could resume in January.

¶11. (C) Hanssen-Bauer was frustrated with Norway's role as the seemingly only conduit through which the LTTE could send its requests to the international community and vice versa. Calling Norway "a channel overloaded with messages," he noted that the sheer volume of LTTE requests hampered Norway's focus on arguably more substantive efforts leading up to the peace talks. Norway is overloaded in the other direction as well, he added, with at least half of his sessions with the LTTE always filled with tough messages from the international community, leaving too little time to discuss concrete issues.

Comment

¶12. (C) Although not explicitly stated, it appears that Norway is observing (and considering) the actions of the parties immediately following the Geneva talks in devising a future negotiation strategy. Whether Norway would advocate a suggested political agenda (in line with the Tokyo Co-Chairs meeting) was not addressed in the meeting. We will continue to closely follow their evolving thinking.
Johnson